

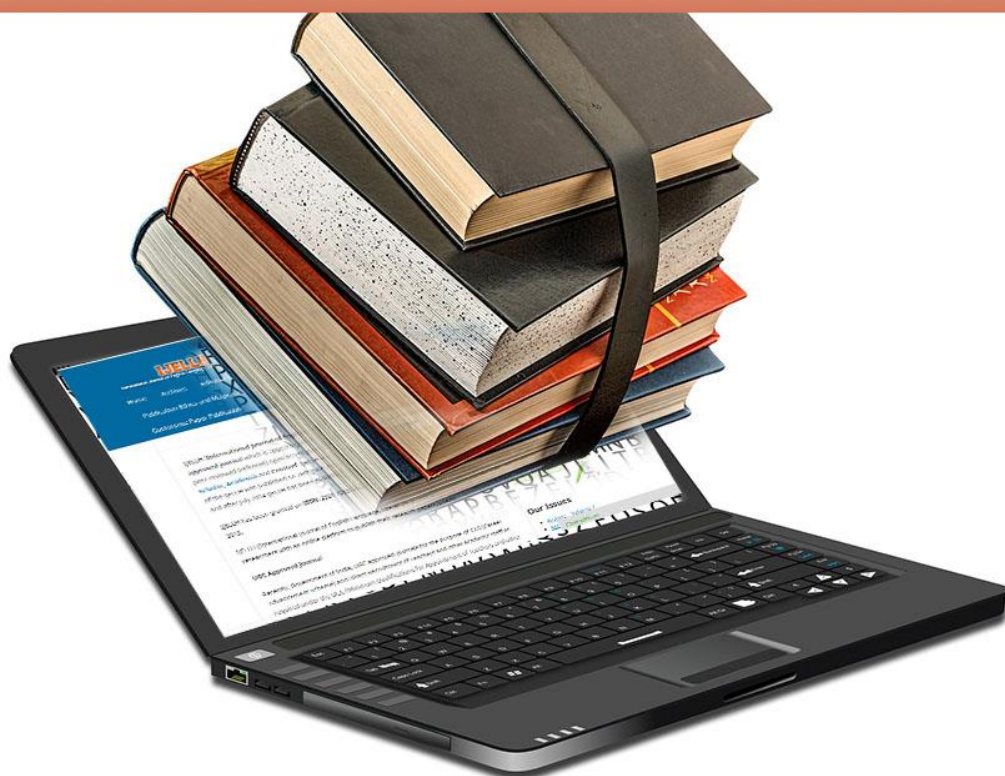
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Politics of Surveillance in Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*

Abstract

Jasmine Days, the second novel by Benyamin is set in the Middle East and looks at the life of South Asian migrants in the region. This Paper discusses the cultural hegemony in Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* and explains how the technology and surveillance became cultural institutions that promote hegemony. It further explores the heterogeneous relationship created by surveillance in a society and analyses the different modes of surveillance and its role and acceptance as depicted in the novel.

Key words: cultural hegemony, surveillance

William O. Douglas writes "We are rapidly entering the age of no privacy, where everyone is open to surveillance at all times; where there are no secrets from government." It seems to be true when we analyse certain fiction especially Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*.

The protagonist Sameera Parvin in Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*, in the midst of revolution in the state, identifies herself under a hierarchical structure in society that helps only to create confusion and chaos among the public. The class distinctions prevailed in the society as being immigrants or based on different communities in the society such as the Shias, Sunni etc turn

these people revolutionaries. People like Ali were humiliated and were referred to as “the second class”.

Information technologies help people to share news, ideas, opinions via internet- social networking sites such as face book and twitter; emails, YouTube, mobile phones and so on. Sameera's job as a radio jockey in the novel is a break away from the stereotypical portrayal of women and is a reminder of the influence of mass media. But one cannot forget the fact that in all these areas people are being monitored or are under mass surveillance. Through each and every mass media an authoritative power is monitoring or governing the public. They want their interests to be carried out by the public even if they claim that their interests favour the interests of everyone. The dominating role played by the surveillant can be identified in the novel when the radio programmers were prohibited to broadcast current news regarding the conflict concerning government. The Facebook chats of Sameera's group members are shown in the book as it is; as if they are chatting; the pages of their dialogues remind us the presence of an invisible audience. But later we can see updates in the novel which prove that these Facebook pages can be seen itself as a revolution. The presence of the surveillant is again revealed when Aisha auntie (Bhupoma) is caught for searching Facebook. Her secretive mode for a glimpse of people through social networking sites with a fake profile is a challenge which questions her identity.

In *Jasmine Days* we can spot a heterogeneous relationship created by these modes of surveillances in the society. It creates colonizer- colonized relation, the sense of “otherness” (in the form of the second class citizens) and it turns to be one of the cultural institutions that promotes hegemony.

When we consider the hegemony of the ruling class we can relate it with Foucault's notion of Power: “Power is sometimes an opportunity to be successful, fulfilled or loved. It is not always harmful. We are active within relations of power.” (Ball 30). Some instances in the

novel agree with Foucault's statement. Taya's point regarding the freedom that the women enjoy in the society substantiates the successful articulation of the majesty's hegemony.

"His majesty's administration has protected their freedom as women. They can go to school, college, and work. If they want to go to a party at night, they can do so."
(Benyamin121).

Sameera also questions Ali who keeps a revolutionary attitude towards the government as:

"Has this country ever harmed you? Don't you have education, a secure job and... Why would you want to bring down such peaceful, generous rulers?"(61)

Surveillance by police and the authorities can be spotted out in the novel in many cases where people are being watched. "...the camps were full of CIDs and that every movement in the camps was being observed." (131). When the tension between varied communities were at the peak, "people started constructing barricades and checkpoints at the entrances of their galis and villages"(147) to guard themselves from intruders and Sameera herself was under house arrest and was being watched as the government suspected that she would become ally with the revolutionaries. All these instances depicted in the novel imply the fear that is widespread in every heart. This tension was aggravated when the Facebook war began between the protestors and the government.

The contrapuntal reading of "His Majesty's side" (184) or rule made Taya say that it's because of the survival of his administration that many foreigners including him survived in the city. He showed Sameera the terrifying CCTV footage of His Majesty murdering a woman who revolted against him to make her believe and understand the intensity in which the authoritative power subjugate the ordinary people or whom they consider inferiors. One Indian was killed by the soldiers for videotaping the march. All these demonstrate the hierarchy in society; and it is carried and measured out with the help of surveillance system which is a means to dominate as depicted in the novel.

Surveillance system including both technology and human means has greater impact on people and turn itself into a cultural hegemony that disseminates power structure in a society. The heterogeneous relationship created by the different modes of surveillance in a society creates confusion and conflict. Further studies in the surveillance space are relevant to ensure whether the Article19 of United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is followed or negotiated as UDHR states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

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